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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP

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SUBJECT: SALEH TAKES PR HIT FOR DOHA, STOKES PAN-ARAB FLAMES IN KUWAIT

SUMMARY

1. President Saleh's decision not to send Yemeni representation to the emergency Arab League summit called by Qatar for January 16 left him and the ROYG open to criticism and condemnation by the Yemeni opposition and the public at large. Observers largely credit pressure from Saudi Arabia and Egypt for Saleh's decision to pull out of the summit. Opposition MPs and media publicly excoriated Saleh and his ruling GPC party for the decision and called for an investigation. For his part, Saleh's performance at the Kuwait summit was a fall back to pan-Arab sentiment after a strong negative reaction by the Yemeni public. End Summary.

SALEH GETS HIT, HITS BACK WITH PAN-ARAB VISION

2. During the week of January 11, President Saleh had publicly called for unified Arab action on Gaza to include an emergency session of the Arab League. On January 14, the ROYG officially announced that it would send a delegation to Doha. When President Saleh subsequently called off Yemeni participation in the Qatari-sponsored emergency Arab League meeting scheduled for January 16, Yemeni opposition media had a field day, criticizing him and his GPC party for "selling out" to Saudi and Egyptian influence. Sources in the Nasserite Party, part of the opposition Joint Meeting Parties, condemned the ROYG's reversal on the Qatar summit, calling it a "prideful affront" to the Palestinians. Others accused Saleh directly of "selling out" the Palestinians for a financial quid pro quo from the Saudis.

3. In the run-up to the January 19 Arab League Economic Forum in Kuwait, Saleh has made a concerted public effort to re-establish himself as the champion of the Palestinian cause. (Note: In early 2008, Saleh's intervention to mediate between Fatah and Hamas provided him with positive press coverage and popular support in Yemen. End note.) Prior to his arrival in Kuwait, Saleh spoke publicly about the need to "open the gates of 'volunteering' amongst the Islamic world for the sake of the victory of their brothers in Palestine." (Note: Use of the word "volunteering" in this context implies a call to arms. End note.)

4. At the conference, Saleh, struck an unexpected pan-Arabist tone in his remarks, calling for the establishment of an "international Arab union" which would facilitate and coordinate efforts by all Arab states on the behalf of individual members. Saleh said that the past failures of the Arab League and the Arab leadership in general necessitated a "change in the way in which Arabs go about joint works." Saleh went on to describe his plan for the union, which would realize "complete political, economic, social, developmental, cultural, security, and defense coordination" between the member states. Saleh added that the Arab nations have the economic, human, and military capital to "defend our race, our homelands, and our Arab and Islamic identities, as well as preserve our rights and dignity."

OH YEAH, GAZA...

5. Saleh also presented an action plan for Gaza that was unchanged from versions leaked in the press prior to the summit. Saleh's eight-point plan for Gaza contained the following items:

-The immediate and complete withdrawal of the Israelis from Gaza and the removal of the "traces of aggression" (i.e. barricades and other tactical infrastructure)

-The opening of all border crossings.

-The end of the blockade on the Palestinian people.

-A review of the foreign relations and all forms of political and economic cooperation with Israel.

-A coordinated Arab movement to impose a military, political, and economic blockade on Israel and to prevent Israeli import of weapons.

-The trial of Israeli leadership responsible for the massacres that it committed against the innocent people of Gaza in front of the International Court, which was worse than what occurred with the war criminals in Serbia.

-The establishment of a fund for the reconstruction of Gaza and to support the struggle of the Palestinian people.

-Demanding from Israel monetary compensation for the Palestinians.

COMMENT

16. Palestine, and particularly support for the Hamas government in Gaza, is normally a safe topic for the Saleh regime. The Palestinian cause - and the ROYG's role in supporting it - is a repeated theme in Yemeni political discourse. Yemen's decision to pull out of the Qatari summit clearly had a negative impact on Saleh's public image in Yemen, with normally muted direct criticism of the President becoming full volume. While Yemen remains a minor player in the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict regionally, domestically there seems to be no greater issue to motivate the Yemeni populace to public action. Saleh's Arab League proposal should be seen in this light, as an attempt by Saleh to rehabilitate his Palestinian credentials in front of a Yemeni public perplexed by their president's decision to pull out of a summit he himself called for. End Comment.

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